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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA AND IPA
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SUBJECT: GAZA: MUALLIM PUSHING HUMANITARIAN TRUCE, CLAIMS
TO HAVE HAMAS AGREEMENT

Classified By: Classified by CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.5 b and d
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¶1. (C) Summary: FM Walid al-Muallim told Senator Specter December 30 that Syria wants to help broker a humanitarian truce in Gaza. After a series of contacts with his European counterparts, Muallim met with Hamas leader Khalid Mesha'al and other Palestinian faction heads to ask if they would agree to a humanitarian truce and to talks later on a cease-fire with Israel. He claimed that Mesha'al had agreed on both counts. Muallim planned to report back to his European counterparts; he did not clarify what he thought the next steps would be to broker a humanitarian truce. Muallim leaves December 31 to attend the AL ministerial in Cairo; he was non-committal as to whether an AL summit would follow. End summary.

¶2. (C) Coming directly from a December 30 meeting with Hamas leader Khalid Mesha'al, Muallim told visiting Senator Arlen Specter over lunch he would be leaving the following morning for Cairo to attend the AL ministerial on Gaza. (Muallim's remarks on Iraq, U.S.-Syrian relations, Iran and human rights will be reported septel.) Hamas's morale was "high," Muallim reported. Though Israel was out to "change the landscape" in Gaza by eradicating Hamas, Hamas was fighting back and would endure.

¶3. (C) Muallim said he had also met with or called Syria-based Palestinian leaders after conferring with German FM Steinmeyer and others on the question of whether Syria could help in reaching a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel, and whether Hamas would guarantee cessation of missile attacks during a ceasefire. (Note: European diplomats here told us EU foreign ministers would be meeting later in the day to discuss this proposal. According to an evening al Jazeera report from Paris, the EU ministers had agreed to support a humanitarian truce.)

¶4. (C) Muallim said he had agreed to check with Hamas on two issues: (1) would Hamas agree to respect a humanitarian cease-fire? And (2) would Hamas agree to talks on a longer ceasefire with Israel? He claimed Hamas (and other Palestinian faction leaders in Damascus) had said yes to both. Pressed by Charge, Muallim said that "Hamas agreed to accept a truce and implement it." He would be relaying these commitments back to his European counterparts. (Muallim confirmed he had spoken with FMs Moratinos, Kouchner, and Store and would be talking to FS Miliband.) In response to

a question about what Syria saw as the next step toward a ceasefire, Muallim replied Syria saw three phases: (1) a humanitarian truce that would address the immediate humanitarian needs on the ground and allow diplomacy a chance to work; (2) a truce between Hamas and Israel; and (3) resumption of talks on the Syria and Palestinian tracks.

¶5. C) Muallim commented Syria had hoped the new U.S. administration would open opportunities for peace with Israel. Israel's siege of Gaza and its brutal military assault on Palestinians there had obliged Syria (and Turkey as well) to suspend indirect peace talks with Israel. It would be critical not to lose the opportunity for progress if the U.S. were to support the peace process and the Israeli elections produced a government willing to negotiate. Muallim was less clear on how to get to the first stage and who, if anyone, would be speaking for the Palestinians in Gaza. Syria would help but could only speak for itself, Muallim maintained. Others, such as the Europeans, might be willing to speak to Hamas, he implied without saying so directly.

¶6. (C) Asked whether there would be an AL summit, Muallim explained that several countries had expressed a preference to let the ministers decide the appropriate next steps. He said that, if a summit were to take place, it was not yet agreed whether it would take place in Cairo or Doha. He claimed venue was not important to Syria. In response to a question regarding Syria's relations with Egypt, Muallim and his aides tried but failed to stifle laughter. "I have great regard for Mubarak as a man," commented Muallim, "but not as

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a leader."

¶7. (C) Finally, Muallim observed that Hamas and PIJ leaders had told him during their conversations that day that they knew Israel wanted to eradicate them but Israel should consider what would follow. If Israel should eradicate them (but it would not, Muallim averred), they would be replaced by Al-Qaeda, a prospect worse, apparently, in the eyes of Hamas, PIJ, and Muallim than the status quo.

¶8. (C) Comment: Clearly eager to discuss Gaza, Muallim seemed to be pursuing some sort of plan but, as he noted, was not asking the U.S. administration to assist. Muallim went to great lengths to emphasize the independence of Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups, all the while touting Syria's ability to win their support for a cease-fire. Muallim's close coordination with European foreign ministers not only vindicated his efforts to end SARG isolation, but it appeared to be aimed at putting Western pressure on Israel to end the military operation in Gaza. We believe a central element of Muallim's strategy is to portray Hamas as a responsible party willing to negotiate with Israel. Left unsaid is that such a role for Hamas would come at the expense of the Palestinian Authority. Muallim and his aides barely tried to conceal disdain for Egypt and their pleasure over mounting public pressure on moderate Arab countries to side with Hamas. It remains unclear how Syria would actually go about achieving a humanitarian truce, but with the French and EU now on board with the concept, the SARG can let others do the heavy lifting while offering a direct line of communication to Hamas.

¶9. (SBU) CODEL Specter did not have an opportunity to clear this cable.

CONNELLY